

## LISTENING TO FAMILIES AND CITIZENS

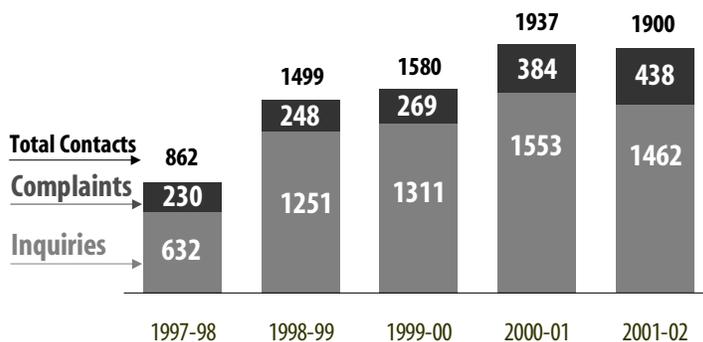
The Ombudsman listens to families and citizens who contact the office with questions or concerns about services provided through the child protection and child welfare system. By listening carefully, the Ombudsman can respond effectively to inquiries and complaints, and can identify recurring problems faced by families and children receiving services. Families and citizens who contact the Ombudsman with their questions and concerns strengthen the office's ability to uncover systemic problems and to facilitate improvements that will generate better services for children and families.

This section describes the contacts made by families and citizens to the Ombudsman during the reporting period of September 1, 2001 through August 31, 2002. It also highlights significant five-year trends in the contacts received by the Ombudsman between 1997-98 and 2001-02.<sup>1</sup>

### Contacts to the Ombudsman

The total number of contacts made by families and citizens to the Ombudsman has increased dramatically since 1998. While the number of staff assigned to the Ombudsman (6 FTE) has remained constant over the past five years, the number of inquiries to the office has more than doubled. The number of complaints filed with the Ombudsman has increased 90 percent.

#### Contacts to the Ombudsman have Doubled in Five Years.



Source: The Family and Children's Ombudsman

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**Contacts.** When families and citizens contact the Ombudsman, the contact is documented either as an inquiry or a complaint.

**1. Inquiries.** Persons call or write to the Ombudsman wanting basic information on how the office can help them with a concern, or they have questions about the child protection and child welfare system.

The Ombudsman responds directly to these inquiries, some of which require additional research. The office refers other questions to the appropriate agency.

#### **2. Complaints.**

Persons file a complaint with the Ombudsman when they have a specific complaint against the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) or other agency that they want the office to investigate.

The Ombudsman investigates every complaint that it receives within its jurisdiction.

<sup>1</sup> After the Ombudsman began operations in 1997, it established an automated database. Using this database, the office has been able to track inquiry and complaint trends since 1998. Nineteen ninety-eight was the first year in which the Ombudsman was able to obtain data over a 12-month period.

**From September 1, 2001 to August 31, 2002, families and citizens contacted the Ombudsman 1,900 times.**

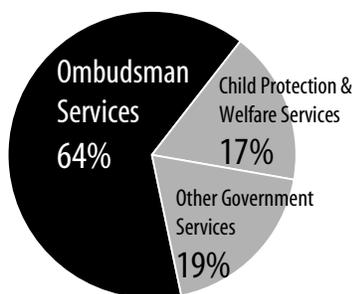
These contacts were primarily **inquiries** made by persons in search of information and assistance. Nearly a fourth of these contacts were formal **complaints** seeking an Ombudsman investigation.

## Fielding Inquiries

The Ombudsman received 1462 inquiries from families and citizens who needed information at an average rate of **28 inquiries per week** between September 1, 2001 and August 31, 2002.

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**Most inquiries seek information about the Ombudsman.**



Total Inquiries = 1,455

Source: The Family and Children's Ombudsman

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- ▶ **Sixty-four percent** of those making an inquiry wanted basic information on how the Ombudsman could help, how to file a complaint, and how to get a complaint form. If their concern involved the DSHS Children's Administration, the right to contact the Office of Constituent Relations was explained.
- ▶ **About 17 percent** concerned laws, policies, and procedures for child protection and child welfare services. The Ombudsman does not provide legal advice; however, legal rights and responsibilities were explained.
- ▶ **About 19 percent** concerned other government services. The Ombudsman found out who to contact, and referred callers to agencies that could help.

## Receiving Complaints

Complaints provide the mechanism through which the Ombudsman is able to identify children and families at risk of harm due to an agency's action or inaction and pinpoint recurring and systemic problems that adversely affect children and families.

A complaint to the Ombudsman must involve an act or inaction by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) or other agency that affects:

- ▶ A child potentially at risk of abuse, neglect or other harm by a parent or caretaker.
- ▶ A child or parent that has been the subject of a report or finding of child abuse or neglect, or parental incapacity.

A complaint form is required to initiate an Ombudsman investigation. It requests the name, address, and phone number of the person making the complaint. It asks the relationship of the person to the child and includes questions about: the family; custody or supervision of the child; steps taken to resolve the problem; a statement of the facts; and the action requested. It also asks how the person heard about the Ombudsman.

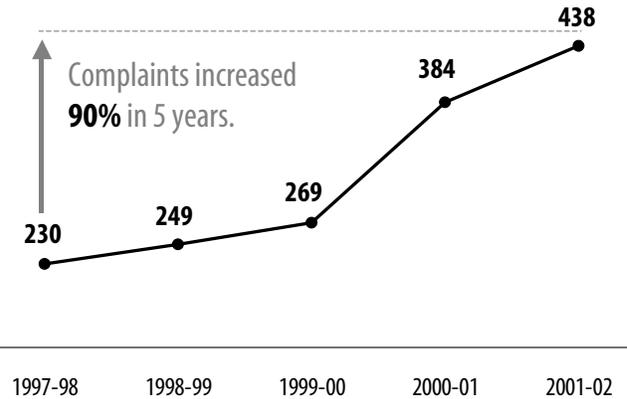
Complaint forms are available in English, Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, and Braille. Forms are also available on the Ombudsman’s web site, [www.governor.wa.gov/ofco](http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco).

### Complaint Trends

Over the past five years, data collected by the Ombudsman have revealed the following trends:

- ▶ Complaints to the Ombudsman most often are filed by parents, grandparents and other family members.
- ▶ Complaints most often are directed against the DSHS Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS).
- ▶ Complaints most often identify the Department of Social and Health Services’ allegedly inappropriate response to reported child maltreatment as an issue of concern.
- ▶ Complaints most often involve a child age seven or younger.

### Annual Complaints to the Ombudsman:



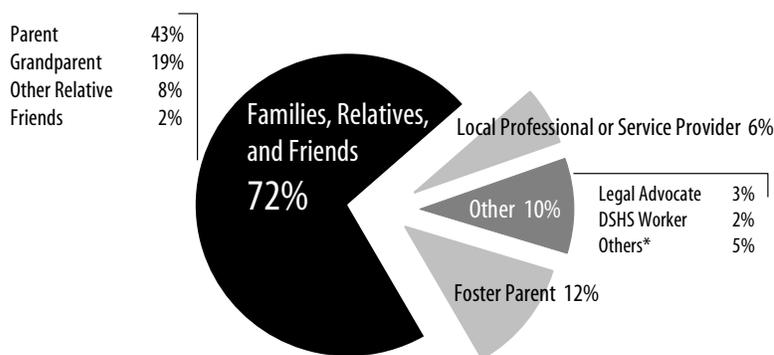
Source: The Family and Children’s Ombudsman

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There has been a significant upward trend in the number of complaints filed with the Ombudsman. In the current reporting period alone, the Ombudsman received 438 complaints from families and citizens seeking an investigation – an all-time high.<sup>2</sup>

### Persons Who Complained to the Ombudsman

From September 1, 2001 to August 31, 2002



As in previous years, parents, grandparents and other relatives of the child whose family is involved with DSHS filed the majority of the complaints with the Ombudsman.

\*Others include children, law enforcement officials, legal guardians, parents whose parental rights have been terminated, and unknown.

Source: The Family and Children’s Ombudsman

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<sup>2</sup> Prior to 2000-01 the Ombudsman counted complaints filed together by a couple as single complaints. Starting that year, in an effort to improve the tracking of complainants, the office began counting complaints filed together by a couple as separate complaints. In 2000-01, 12 couples filed a complaint together; these were counted as 24 complaints. In 2001-02, 18 couples filed a complaint together; these were counted as 36 complaints. If complaints received from couples in 2001-02 had been counted as single complaints, (as in previous years) the percentage increase in complaints received by the Ombudsman between 1997-98 and 2001-02 would be 83 percent, instead of 90 percent.

**Upward Trend in Referrals by DSHS Workers and Local Service Providers.**

The number of complainants referred to the Ombudsman by a Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) worker or by a local service provider (e.g., teacher, counselor, child care provider, doctor, mental health counselor, private agency social worker or other service provider) increased substantially over the past five years.

Since 1998, the number of Ombudsman complainants who said they had learned about the office from a DSHS worker has increased 20 percent.

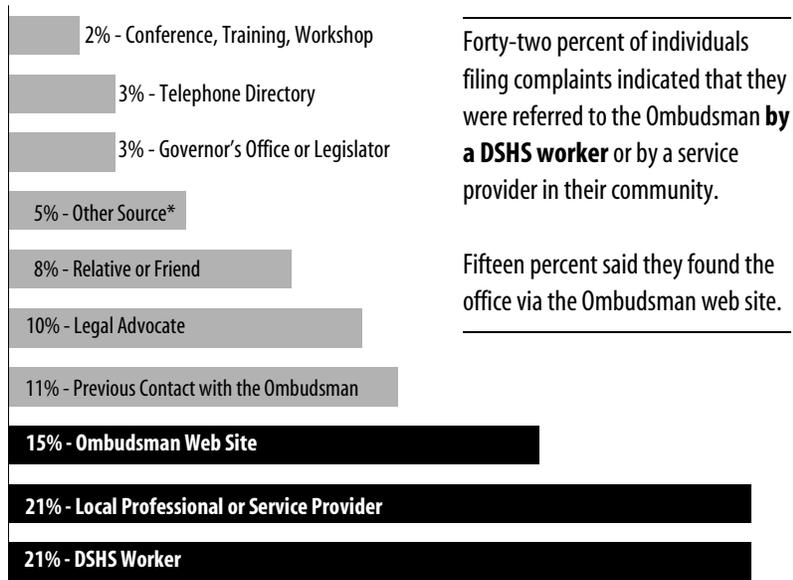
This increase may have been due in part to DSHS's affirmative response in 1999 to the Ombudsman's request that the department incorporate information about the office into the Children's Administration Training Academy program (which new social workers are required to attend) and in DSHS's complaint brochure and "Client's Rights" poster.

Since 1998, the number of Ombudsman complainants that said they heard about the office from a local service provider has increased 19 percent.

This increase may have been due in part to the Ombudsman's vigorous efforts to increase awareness among local service providers through participation in professional conferences and by broad dissemination of information about the office.

**Who Referred Families and Citizens to the Ombudsman**

Source of Referrals from September 1, 2001 to August 31, 2002



Forty-two percent of individuals filing complaints indicated that they were referred to the Ombudsman by a DSHS worker or by a service provider in their community.

Fifteen percent said they found the office via the Ombudsman web site.

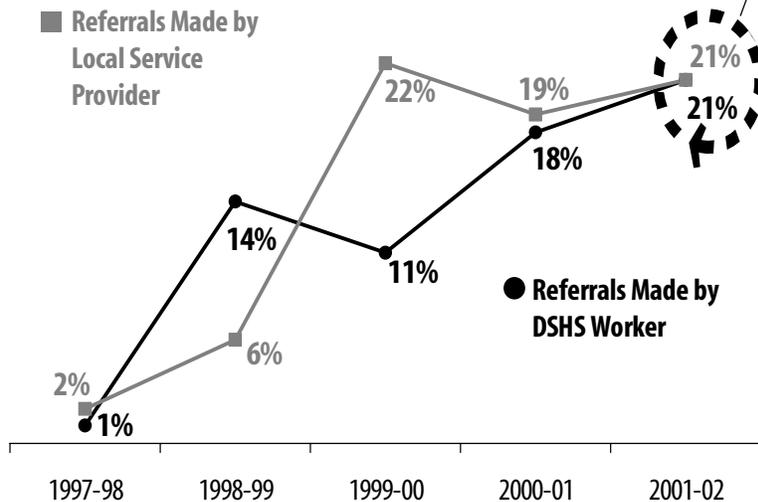
\*Other source includes: law enforcement; media; and unknown.

Source: The Family and Children's Ombudsman

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**Since 1998, the percent of referrals made by DSHS workers and local service providers has grown substantially.**

In 2002, referrals by DSHS workers and local service providers together accounted for 42 percent of complaints.



Source: The Family and Children's Ombudsman

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### Complaints Involving DSHS

The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children’s Administration is the state’s largest provider of child protection and child welfare services. It is therefore not surprising that the Children’s Administration was the subject of 96 percent of complaints to the Ombudsman.<sup>3</sup>

Of these, 96 percent were directed at the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), which includes Child Protective Services, Child Welfare and Adoption Services, and Family Reconciliation Services. A small percentage involved the Children’s Administration headquarters and the Division of Licensed Resources (DLR), which licenses and investigates alleged child maltreatment in foster homes, group homes, and other residential facilities for children.

### Complaints against DSHS Children’s Administration by Division

From September 1, 2001 to August 31, 2002



Total Children’s Administration Complaints=420

Source: The Family and Children’s Ombudsman March 2003

### Complaints against the Children’s Administration by DSHS region:



DSHS Regions

	Children and Family Services	Licensed Resources
<b>Region 1 Totals</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>1</b>
Regional Office-Spokane	49	
Moses Lake	13	
Newport	2	
Colville	1	
Colfax	1	
Omak	4	
Wenatchee	4	1
<b>Region 2 Totals</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>2</b>
Regional Office-Yakima	1	1
Yakima	19	1
Richland/TriCities	10	
Sunnyside	1	
Toppenish	1	
Walla Walla	11	
Clarkston	4	
Ellensburg	1	
<b>Region 3 Totals</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>2</b>
Regional Office-Everett	2	
Alderwood/Lynnwood	15	
Oak Harbor	9	
Bellingham	8	
Monroe/Sky Valley	1	
Mount Vernon	8	
Arlington/Smokey Point	6	
Everett	20	2
Friday Harbor	1	

Source: The Family and Children’s Ombudsman

	Children and Family Services	Licensed Resources
<b>Region 4 Totals</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>4</b>
Regional Office-Seattle	6	
Kent/King South	23	
Bellevue/King Eastside	21	1
Seattle Central	9	
Seattle South	14	2
Seattle North	8	1
<b>Region 5 Totals</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>2</b>
Regional Office-Tacoma	46	1
Bremerton/Kitsap	19	1
<b>Region 6 Totals</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>1</b>
Regional Office - Lacey/Olympia	5	1
Vancouver	14	
Aberdeen	6	
Shelton	1	
Centralia	6	
South Bend	2	
Tumwater	5	
Kelso	7	
Port Angeles	4	
Port Townsend	6	
Stevenson	1	

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<sup>3</sup> The remaining four percent were directed against: Other DSHS divisions, Division of Child Support and Division of Developmental Disabilities; Family Court; local CASA program; and tribal child welfare services.

**Most Frequently Identified Complaint Issues:**

From September 1, 2001 to August 31, 2002 *(Some complaints identified more than one issue)*

**Child Safety** \_\_\_\_\_ 203 complaints

- ✓ Failure to protect child from parental abuse or neglect
- ✓ Failure to address safety concerns involving child in foster care or other substitute care
- ✓ Failure to address safety concerns involving child being returned to parental care
- ✓ Failure to provide appropriate services to child at risk of harming self or others

**Family Separation and Reunification** \_\_\_\_\_ 190 complaints

- ✓ Unnecessary removal of child from parental care
- ✓ Failure to provide appropriate contact between child and family
- ✓ Failure to reunite families despite parental compliance with court-ordered services
- ✓ Failure to place child with relatives
- ✓ Inappropriate termination of parental rights

**Dependent Child Health, Well-Being, Permanency**\_\_ 95 complaints

- ✓ Inappropriate change of child's foster or other substitute placement
- ✓ Inadequate development or implementation of plan to transition child to new placement
- ✓ Failure to provide child with appropriate medical, mental health or educational services
- ✓ Unreasonable delay or opposition to adoption

Source: The Family and Children's Ombudsman

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**Complaint Issues**

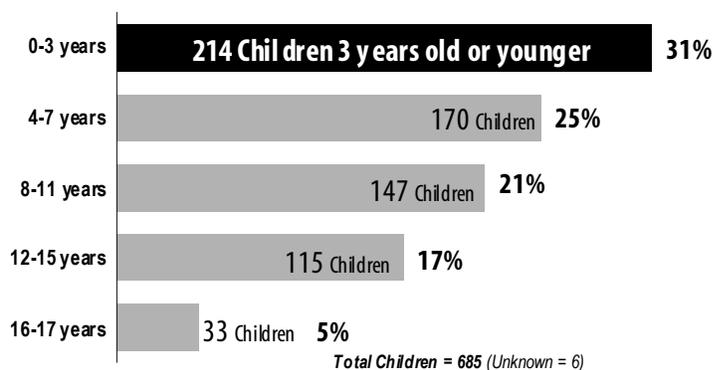
As in previous years, **safety of children** was the issue most frequently identified in complaints to the Ombudsman.

Of concern was DSHS's allegedly inadequate response to the reported maltreatment of children living in their parents' care, as well as children living in foster care or in other substitute care.

Many of the children identified in complaints to the Ombudsman were especially **vulnerable due to their young age**.

Almost **one third** of the children identified in complaints during the reporting year were **age three or younger**. Fifty-six percent were age seven or younger.

**Ages of children identified in complaints:**



Source: The Family and Children's Ombudsman

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